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ABSTRACT

Though small school districts comprise the majority of school districts in the United States, they have been overshadowed by the needs and standards applied to the larger schools. Problems specific to small school districts include lack of resources and financial strength, narrower range of program offerings, educational equity, and lack of evaluation standards that consider the differences between large and small school districts. Among advantages in small school districts are greater community and student involvement and better student/teacher/parent relationships. Because they have a profound impact on the local community, the contributions of small school districts should be valued and supported through equality of resources and programs, recognition of accomplishments, and understanding. (SAS)

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SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS' CONCERNS FOR THE 80's

The small school district. American education is finally recognizing its uniqueness. And the problems shared by administrators of those small school districts are also being acknowledged. These districts with fewer students will continue to represent the majority of school districts in the nation. Their needs must be a focus of concern for the 80's.

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) represents school executives who administer districts of every size in every part of the nation. While keenly aware of its responsibility to serve all districts, AASA in 1978 became especially concerned about the special needs of small districts. For example, burgeoning federal regulations and legal constraints are imposed equally on all districts. But small districts have fewer resources available to respond.

There are approximately 16,000 school districts in the United States. Of these, nearly 7,900 have enrollments of 1,000 students or less. Nearly 15 million students, more than one-third of all kindergarten through twelfth grade students, are enrolled in school districts classified as small.

It is difficult to define what constitutes a small school district. Each state has different parameters for determining the relative size of districts and classifying them according to size. AASA characterizes a small school as any district with 2,000 or fewer students.

Late in the 1970's the small school system began to re-emerge as an institution needing special help. For some years, there was a trend toward consolidation of smaller school districts, which had the effect of increased bussing to adjacent communities where centralized services were offered. Consolidation appears to have reached its peak. Now, a move

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maintaining small community schools is becoming more common. In addition, the formation of educational service agencies to provide services to a number of smaller districts has increased the efficiency of operating those systems.

Small school districts outnumber large districts, they have problems which are special and cry for attentior. The following concerns are just a few which have been identified:

1. The lack of resources and financial strength in some small school districts limits effectiveness. It is more costly to operate a small school district. Local support is limited but many of the expenses are the same as those of a larger district with a more substantial tax base. Further, many small districts, desperately in need of federal assistance do not have the time, expertise, or "grantsmanship" to compete.
2. It is difficult for small school districts to look successful when judged by the same standards used to measure the achievements of larger school districts. A narrower range of program offerings is just one limiting factor.
3. Many small school districts suffer from a lack of "educational equity". When the resources are distributed from federal or state appropriations, the small school districts are often overlooked or do not receive a fair share of available funds. The attention of the media toward urban concerns and state political considerations often works against the small district.

4. Are state and federal representatives sensitive to the needs of smaller districts? Can they relate to the problems and concerns of the administrator of a smaller district? The administrators of small school districts are often cautious of outside help and doubt the credibility of outside "experts" who profess to understand the perspective of the small school district.

5. On-staff expertise to deal with the myriad of problems facing schools requires more technical assistance from educational service agencies or those at the state level. For example, a recent AASA energy use survey showed school districts with under 5,000 enrollment used 12% more energy per square foot than their larger counterparts.

These problems and others are unique to small school districts. But there are also special characteristics of these districts which contribute to their success. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Community involvement in activities and in solving the problems of small school districts is usually great and enthusiastic. The school represents the community and the community reflects a pride citizens feel for their school. This closeness to the community is an element sometimes missing in larger, less personal systems where pupils and citizens often maintain their anonymity. While the cost of generating community support in large districts is sometimes substantial, the community is a more natural part of the everyday life of the small school district.

2. Small schools involve a majority of the students in activities. Students have experiences sometimes denied students in large school districts simply because of the vast numbers of students who must be served.
3. The individual social and emotional needs of a student, as well as his/her intellectual needs, are often recognized and diagnosed more easily in a small school. The relationship between teacher and home is more easily achieved.

The American Association of School Administrators recommends small school districts be recognized and supported in the following ways:

1. Federal resources should be as available to small school districts as they are to larger school districts. Often small schools do not have the personnel or expertise to seek and acquire available outside resources. Assistance should be provided which would enable small school districts to compete for funds on an equal basis with larger school districts. Legislation or regulatory language should specifically provide for equitable distribution of funds by district.
2. Federally mandated programs often place an unrealistic burden on small school districts in the form of strain on an already limited budget, additional paper flow, requirements and demands on a limited number of administrative personnel. This concern should be recognized and special consideration given to small school districts in meeting guidelines and mandates.
3. The positive instructional programs operating in small school districts should be recognized. The AASA Small School District Network is working to identify and publicize the positive

features of small school districts. Support is necessary in order to make this network successful.

4. In approximately 30 states, small school districts are served by educational service agencies. It is urgent that federal and state officials utilize this existing framework to work with small school districts. Communication between the educational service agencies, the state and federal representatives must be enhanced in order to avoid duplicating services or overlooking services not provided. Whenever feasible, legislative and/or regulatory language should make it permissible for educational service agencies to apply for grants on behalf of their member districts.
5. Colleges of Education should provide better training for small school district personnel. The skills necessary to administer and/or teach in a small school district are different from those required in larger districts. Special preservice education and in-service education should address itself to this problem.

In summary, small school districts are unique. They outnumber large school districts. They have a profound impact on the local community. They should be recognized for their contributions and not penalized for their smallness. Small school districts should be allowed to be successful on their own merit and not because they emulate larger school districts. We should value the contributions of the small school districts and support them through equality of resources and programs, recognition of accomplishment and understanding.